

Allegories of awakening: Melancholy, repetition, and “race” in Charles Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars*

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I

Time touches all things with destroying hand; and if he seem now and then to bestow the bloom of youth, the sap of spring, it is but a brief mockery, to be surely and swiftly followed by the wrinkles of old age, the dry leaves and bare branches of winter. And yet there are places where Time seems to linger lovingly long after youth has departed, and to which he seems loath to bring the evil day. Who has not known some even-tempered old man or woman who seemed to have drunk of the fountain of youth? Who has not seen somewhere an old town that, having long since ceased to grow, yet held its own without perceptible decline? (Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars* 1)

Charles Chesnutt begins *The House Behind the Cedars* in the guise of an allegorist. The opening paragraph of the novel evokes the evanescence of all life governed by the figure of Time. Conceptualized allegorically, time drains everything of its individuality and absorbs it until nothing remains but the recurring figure of Time itself. Yet the allegory appears double-edged, destructive and yet capable of generating a semblance of continuity, feeding a desire for permanence strong enough to sustain a fantasy of lastingness. As if seeking to validate this idea, the narrator lingers on the meditation in the first paragraph, before abruptly destroying it at the beginning of the second paragraph by calling it a “trite reflection” (1). The disclaimer is indeed ironical, for while highlighting the inauthenticity of the allegorical image, it implicitly confirms its validity by identifying it as itself a withered perception.

This self-conscious beginning is an apt expression of the imaginative ambition Chesnutt brought to his first novel and a testimony of the labor he invested in it from its conception in the late 1880s to its publication in 1900. The experience of rewriting the manuscript in a variety of formats in response to repeated rejections by publishers taught the aspiring author much about the limitations that allegory imposed on his imagination and the need to transform these limitations by incorporating them into his artistic conception. When he first submitted the manuscript of “Rena Walden” to the *Century* in early 1890, Chesnutt had already successfully published four stories in prestigious magazines, featuring black characters cast in a form popularized by Southern white writers like Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page. He was therefore taken aback when a story about characters with whose circumstances and aspirations he, as a light-colored mulatto, identified met with an editor’s inability or unwillingness to suspend his disbelief. Richard Gilder, the editor of the *Century*, considered the tragic story of an almost white mulatta who disregards the honest love of a good-natured black neighbor and instead marries a lighter-colored but treacherous man, “amorphous” (McElrath & Leitz 67) and criticized it in terms in which it had in

the nineteenth century become customary to criticize allegory. Writing to George Washington Cable, who acted as Chesnutt's intermediary, Gilder complained about

a brutality in the characters, & a lack of mellowness, lack of spontaneous, imaginative life in the people, lack of outlook [...] that makes them – as here depicted – *uninteresting* [...]. The result seems to me a crude story, not a thoroughly humane one [...]. The hero & heroine are such frauds both of them that they have no interest – *as here described*. The black boy is better, from a literary point of view [...]. (McElrath & Leitz 67, emphasis in the original)

Although Gilder located the failure less in the conception of the characters than in their realization, Chesnutt had his doubts about the significance of this distinction, not without justification perhaps, given Gilder's approval of the "black boy." Chesnutt was of course aware of the saturation of the post-Reconstruction public sphere with typifying and largely negative representations of black people,¹ and from his point of view, the failure of his manuscript was the result of his refusal to conform to conventional standards of representation. To him the black characters that white readers found convincing were obvious stereotypes, allegories of "dog-like fidelity and devotion" (McElrath & Leitz 65), while what he considered life-like portrayals struck his white readers as artificial and inauthentic. Responding to Gilder's enumeration of the shortcomings of his characters, Chesnutt insisted, in a letter to Cable:

I fear, alas! that those are exactly the things that do characterize them, and just about the things that might be expected in them – the very qualities which government and society had for 300 years or so labored faithfully, zealously, and successfully to produce, the only qualities which would have rendered life at all endurable to them in the 19th century. (McElrath & Leitz 66)

Chesnutt, in other words, located the pressure that tended to make his black characters look lifeless and crude in the eyes of his white audience, in the conditions that the history of slavery had bequeathed to the era of segregated identities, which as a writer he confronted in the typifying form of allegory.

Gilder's criticism provided the basis for Chesnutt's revisions of the "Rena Walden" project in subsequent years, not least because he continued to encounter it in one form or another throughout the 1890s, whenever he submitted the rewritten manuscript for publication.² As a consequence, his efforts concentrated on making his characters mellower, endowing them with greater imaginative life, while striving to

1 The pervasively negative representation of black people in the post-Reconstruction era is well-known. See, for instance, Gates ("The Trope of a New Negro" 339–40).

2 The history of the rejections of the "Rena Walden" manuscript prior to its publication as *The House Behind the Cedars* in 1900 is documented in Chesnutt's correspondence. After Gilder, Houghton, Mifflin also rejected the manuscript both as a short story for the *Atlantic* (1890) and as part of a book (1891). In 1895, Chesnutt again approached the *Century* with the rewritten story, but Gilder dissuaded him from resubmitting the manuscript. In 1898, the story caught the interest of Walter Hines Page of Houghton, Mifflin, who advised Chesnutt on its revision and expansion into a novel, but in 1899 Houghton, Mifflin rejected the manuscript again, reiterating some of Gilder's original criticisms: "the story is based on distinctions which are of but little interest to a great many readers." To which Page added that the novel was "not sufficiently mellowed" (McElrath & Leitz 123). For a discussion of Chesnutt's revisions of the manuscript in comparison with its published version, see Sedlack.

preserve as far as possible his fundamentally critical vision. The work and energy he invested in the manuscript thus not only increased Chesnutt's attachment to his characters and their story, but also amounted to a prolonged exploration of the possibilities and limitations of allegory, as he repeatedly recast, and at the same time disguised, his meanings in forms designed to appeal to a genteel readership.³ When *The House Behind the Cedars* was finally published by Houghton, Mifflin in 1900, it was therefore a qualified triumph, and this may well have prompted Chesnutt's remark in his famous 1901 essay on "Superstitions and Folk-Lore of the South" that "creative talent, of whatever grade, is, in the last analysis, only the power of rearrangement – there is nothing new under the sun" (McElrath et al. 156).

The mixture of confidence and resignation expressed in this statement sums up Chesnutt's ambivalent assessment of a literary career which was strongly shaped by the experience of rewriting the "Rena Walden" manuscript. In *House*, this ambivalence can be recognized in the figure of allegory as an articulation of cultural memory, stabilizing identities while situating them in temporal distance to their origin. On the one hand, allegory manifests the pressure of what Ross Posnock calls the "identitarian regime" of segregation (346), which thwarts the protagonists' quest for individuality and self-realization in a white-dominated world by compelling them to revert to stereotypes of racial identity. On the other hand, precisely because it is a form devoid of original meaning, allegory provides the author with the means to acknowledge the inauthenticity of identity as a social construct and to articulate an emergent self in a state of non-coincidence. Seen under this double aspect, allegory indeed seems to be at the heart of Chesnutt's search for a passage from exclusion to openness and to give shape to his exploration of the psychological pressures of identity formation under racial segregation. In this exploration, allegory is intimately associated with melancholy (as the lingering attachment to a lost relation) and traumatic repetition (resisting the precipitous covering of an emergent self). At the same time, the allegorical fabric of *House* allows us to probe the figurative implications of the psychoanalytic legibility of Chesnutt's characters as focuses for the imagination of a new social bond on the site of "race."⁴

3 Seen thus as Chesnutt's imaginative response to the censorial climate that clouded his access to authorship, allegory resembles the double-voiced figure of "Signifyin(g)," which Henry Louis Gates, Jr. identifies as "the trope of tropes" of African American (literary) discourse (*The Signifying Monkey* 52). Indeed it is likely that Chesnutt's apprenticeship in allegory, in the course of his revision of the *Rena Walden* manuscript, built on and extended a training in Signifyin(g) that had started in his childhood and of which he offers us a glimpse in his essay on "Superstitions and Folk-Lore of the South," when he points out that his imagination was nourished by the words of "Old Aunt This and old Uncle That" (156) – as well as by white writers like Joel Chandler Harris. I stick to the concept of allegory here partly because my cultural knowledge is not sufficient to sound the depths of Chesnutt's likely Signifyin(g) and also because I am particularly interested in the implications of the readability of Chesnutt's novel in terms of allegory, given this trope's repercussions in contemporary critical theory.

4 I use the word "race" here and throughout this essay to refer to a binary concept of social identity, based on visible or assumed genetic differences, whose ideological function is essentially reproductive and exclusionary. "Race" tends to preserve discrete communities whose self-images depend on

II

Much of Chesnutt's exploration of allegory is recorded in the character of John Walden/Warwick, Rena's brother, to whom the "trite reflection" of the opening paragraph is ascribed. Indeed, it seems as if in John Chesnutt deliberately flaunted all the traits that Gilder had criticized in his characters. A certain brutality and lack of mellowness, a lack of spontaneous imaginative life and outlook, all characterize John Warwick as he revisits Patesville, the town he left ten years before as John Walden.

John, however, appears to have acquired these traits from the author himself, for the evidence suggests that, at least in the opening pages, John represents a self-portrait of Chesnutt. Playing only a minor part in the early versions of the story, John took on a more significant role and became a prominent focalizer in the last draft of the novel, as Chesnutt abandoned the first person narrator of the earlier versions and thus, as Robert Sedlack puts it, "moved the novel from the realm of memory into the realm of the imagination" (187). In the process, Chesnutt transferred some of his own memories to John, since the opening description of Patesville is, as Chesnutt himself told an audience in Ohio in 1900, modeled on his recollections of his North Carolina hometown Fayetteville.⁵ More significantly, Chesnutt also seems to have transferred to his character a certain mood and temperament, which he on various occasions described as "introspective," "self-conscious," and even "morbid" and "gloomy."⁶

John's mood in the opening chapter of *House* indeed contrasts strikingly with both the weather on the "fine morning in spring" (1) when he visits Patesville and with the genial mood of the town's inhabitants, singling him out, as the title of the first chapter indicates, as a "stranger" in his own hometown. Looking at the town "with an

the contrastive presence of others. The site of "race" is thus, discursively, the site of an inscription that is at the same time a writing out (or erasure) of something else. The figure of allegory highlights the substitutive character of this inscription while bringing it into the realm of choice and opening it to imaginative refiguring. I use quotation marks to distinguish this tropical character of "race."

5 See "Introduction to Temple Course Reading" (McElrath et al. 138). That John's return to Patesville is also Chesnutt's imaginative return to Fayetteville is further suggested by the reference to the murder of a free black man on the stairway of the market house, which John "recall[s] vividly" (*House* 3). According to William L. Andrews (3), Chesnutt witnessed the murder of an alleged rapist on the stairway of the market house in Fayetteville when he was nine years old.

6 In a draft of the letter to Cable in which Chesnutt recorded his response to Gilder's rejection of "Rena Walden" in 1890, Chesnutt protested against Gilder's suggestion that he lacked humor. He went onto say, however, that "my position, my surroundings, are not such as to make me take a humorous view of life. They rather tend the other way. [...] [W]hen I first began to think, circumstances tended make [*sic*] me introspective, self-conscious; latterly I fear they have tended to make me morbid" (McElrath & Leitz 68). Chesnutt here reiterated feelings he had already expressed ten years before in his journal, when he complained about the forced idleness of life in a "supernaturally dull and prosaic town" (Brodhead, *The Journals* 137): "my mind is a sort of mental barometer. In fair weather my spirits are light, I look on everything from a pleasant point of view, and if life doesn't look exactly like a garden of roses it seems to have fewer thorns than I had thought. But let a rainy day set in, and down goes the mental mercury, and my thoughts, sometimes imperceptibly, and sometimes in spite of my utmost efforts, gravitate toward the gloomy and disagreeable" (136-37). At that time, he ascribed this tendency to "idleness, aided perhaps by a slight natural tinge of melancholy" (137), which he sought to dispel by writing.

eager look, in which curiosity and affection were mingled with a touch of bitterness" (2), he observes primarily the ruined state of Pateville in the aftermath of the civil war, where "blackened and dismantled walls marked the place where handsome buildings once had stood" (2). Verbalized by the narrator, John's impressions readily take a cynical turn, as everything reminds him of slavery and of the brutality endured by the black people of the town.⁷ His mood is aptly summarized in the second triteness he offers in the opening pages of the novel, his adaptation of Romans 6:23: "Death [...] is the penalty that all must pay for the crime of living" (4). While again highlighting John's spiritual kinship with the Chesnutt who quotes Ecclesiastes in his "Superstitions" essay,⁸ John's remarks also bring to mind Nietzsche's Zarathustra, suggesting indeed that John's mental state exhibits what Nietzsche describes as the will's melancholy, its "ill will against time" (252), which expresses itself in an aborted revolt and a reluctant resignation:

Everything passes away; therefore everything deserves to pass away. And this too is justice, this law of time that it must devour its children [...]. Alas, where is redemption from the flux of things and from the punishment called existence? (252)

Melancholy thus appears as the most conspicuous trait of Chesnutt's protagonist in the opening pages of the novel, alerting us to the psychological circumstances of his acquisition of the identity of John Warwick. Insofar as it is a corollary of the formation of his identity, John's melancholy indeed exhibits a remarkable analogy to the characteristics of melancholia that Freud detected in the process of the formation of the ego.⁹ According to Freud, melancholia is the symptom of a divided self, formed by conflicting identifications based on object relations that circumstances place out of the subject's reach. As such, melancholia is related to the economy of repression whereby psychic energies are redistributed by a refiguring of object relations in different sites of the self's topography. In the case of melancholia, this economy takes the form of a conflict between an identification based on a particularly resistant cathexis and a correspondingly strong prohibitive identification acting as an ego ideal. Indeed, Freud was ultimately led to identify the manifestation of melancholia as indicative of the presence or formation of a particularly dominant ego ideal, set up with-

7 John's bitter irony surfaces on various occasions in the opening chapter, as when he associates "a colored policeman in the old [white] constable's place" with "the burned buildings" as a sign "that war had left its mark upon the old town" (2-3), when he recalls the "merciful" pardon of the murderer of a free black man (3), or when he wonders at the naming of an intersection as "Liberty Point, - perhaps because slave auctions were sometimes held there in the good old days" (4-5).

8 John's remarks in the opening pages of *House* are indeed in gloomy harmony with the first chapter of Ecclesiastes, the source of the statement that "there is nothing new under the sun," with its meditation on vanity as an endlessly recurring passing away.

9 Freud himself acknowledged, in his "Autobiographical Study," that Nietzsche's diagnosis of the subject riddled by bad conscience anticipated "the laborious findings of psychoanalysis" (Gay 38). In "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), Freud studied melancholia as a special type of neurosis, but in *The Ego and the Id* (1923) he extended his analysis to declare that the substitution of conflicting identifications for object relations "makes an essential contribution towards the building up of what is called [the ego's] 'character'" (Gay 638).

in the ego over and against other identifications. As a distinct agency within the self, internalizing parental authority while incorporating an earlier narcissistic identification, this super-ego confronts the other components of the ego with a dual accusation of insufficiency and excess. Insofar as it “retains,” in Freud’s words, “the character of the father” (Gay 642), it accordingly represents both an injunction to be like the father and a prohibition against it.

Freud’s account of melancholia and the agency of the super-ego lends a certain psychological depth to the character of John, suggesting that his melancholy is the expression of a conflict between his ego ideal in the guise of Warwick and the lingering attachments of Walden. This reminds us that the substitution of one identity for another is governed by the reproductive agency of “race” and allows us to approach John as the focus of Chesnutt’s exploration of a passage from reproduction to innovation. In John’s case, the presence of a strong super-ego seems to force a substitution of whiteness for blackness in a way that eventually leads him to discover agency in a substitutive, or allegorical, occupation of identity.

John’s ego appears to be dominated almost exclusively by his identification with his white father. The triteness he exhibits in his thought and speech could indeed be seen as a measure of his impoverished ego, of the extent to which his identity is allegorical, an image of his father and everything his father stands for. In John’s case, however, the analogy to the Freudian scenario, whereby the identification involves an injunction to be like the father and a prohibition against such emulation, brings into view the color line. The son’s identification with the father therefore includes an element of challenge that resembles the slave’s revolt against the master, as Chesnutt seems to suggest by describing John’s assumption of equality with his father in terms that allude to Frederick Douglass’s famous narrative. Even as he grows into a likeness of his father, acquiring “his father’s face and his father’s voice” (112), John’s education follows the mental itinerary of the slave narrative through the acquisition of literacy and the assimilation of the master’s books, with similar psychological outcome as in Douglass’s case:

When he had read all the books, – indeed, long before he had read them all, – he too had tasted of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge: contentment took its flight, and happiness lay far beyond the sphere where he was born. The blood of his white fathers, the heirs of the ages, cried out for its own, and after the manner of that blood, set about getting the object of its desire. (109)¹⁰

10 Chesnutt here echoes Frederick Douglass’s account of the effect of reading on his mind: “As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish” (Douglass 24). Chesnutt published a biography of Douglass in 1899 and it is possible that Douglass’s narrative inspired his association of learning with the Biblical Fall. In the *Narrative*, Douglass announces his resolution to seek freedom by learning in defiance of his master in diction that echoes Milton’s Satan in *Paradise Lost* (I, 159–62; IV, 109–10): “What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought” (Douglass 20). The parallel between John’s career and Douglass’s extends to John’s assumption of the name of Warwick the Kingmaker from Bulwer Lytton’s *The Last of the Barons* (20), which echoes Douglass’s naming inspired by Scott’s *The Lady of the Lake*.

The echo of Douglass checks the ease with which Chesnutt's proximity to the language of psychoanalysis here would allow us to spell out the implications of the course that John embarks on (which will take the form of an internalization of the object of desire and eventually result in his melancholy), by drawing attention to the way the figure of "race" inserts itself in Chesnutt's conceptualization of the process. For one thing, the association of the familiar scenario with whiteness ("the blood of his white fathers") suggests, however implicitly, the possibility of an unrealized alternative.¹¹ More intriguingly, the phrase, "after the manner," if pressed a little, alerts us to a displacement inherent in John's identification, a displacement that is signaled as a slippage, or distancing, within the seeming circularity of identity. This slippage can be discerned as the trace of a history of miscegenation, which is registered here in a series of displacements within identity: from "white blood" to "its own," "fathers" to "heirs," and "blood" to "manner." Though apparently easily passed over – and an allusion to passing appears to be present in "after the manner" –, the displacement nevertheless insists as a potentially insurmountable distance extending "far beyond," and as such seems to be the true cause of John's melancholy. In both cases, however, the closed circularity of "race" is giving way to an image of spatial extension.

Within the psychoanalytic framework, this displacement can be read as the mark of a substitution, unknown to the subject, of one object for another that is denied or out of reach. What is denied here is blackness and what is substituted is whiteness. Chesnutt captures John at a point where this substitution already appears to have inscribed itself as a conscious denial, but in one of the few glimpses of John's adolescence we also see that this consciousness is formed through submission to paternal authority. At the age of fifteen, John confronts the color line:

He was informed one day that he was black. He denied the proposition and thrashed the child who made it. The scene was repeated the next day, with a variation, – he was himself thrashed by a larger boy. When he had been beaten five or six times, he ceased to argue the point, though to himself he never admitted the charge. His playmates might call him black; the mirror proved that God, the Father of all, had made him white; and God, he had been taught, made no mistakes, – having made him white, He must have meant him to be white. (107)

Like the phrase, "after the manner," in the passage quoted above, the mirror here marks a displacement. What John sees in the mirror is the likeness of the father, a

11 One implication of this is that John's melancholy is inseparable from the white identity he has assumed, not only an effect of his personal trajectory but an element of the culture of genteel white society itself. His verdict that "Death [...] is the penalty that all must pay for the crime of living" (4), suggesting that a loss of vitality is a corollary of the good life he has found since leaving his hometown, can thus be read as an oblique comment on the mentality of the genteel readers of regionalist fiction who were Chesnutt's primary clientele. As Richard Brodhead has pointed out, Chesnutt already portrayed this readership in his conjure stories in the figure of the carpetbagger's wife Annie, a "person devitalized by her own cultural refinements [who] can imaginatively possess [...] the more fully *animated* life of blacks in slavery, and thereby reclaim a life force she has forfeited" (*Cultures* 205). Eschewing such nostalgia, John's melancholy then seems designed to nourish in Chesnutt's readers an alternative sense of being based on an active assumption of the otherness at the heart of selfhood.

likeness that, like Adam's, comes with an injunction, and his self-recognition resonates with a claim, risking the threat of punishment, as well as a resignation, which we can perhaps hear better when Rena a few pages later repeats John's words to justify her decision not to follow her brother: "God must have meant me to stay here" (121).

John's deliberate assumption of whiteness as the first step to an independent selfhood thus lands him in a paradox, as he seeks to break free from "the blight of his inheritance" (19) by claiming "an inalienable birthright" (15), so that his extrication from the circumstances of his origin involuntarily ties him more firmly to the figure of authority that fathers him. Imaginatively fathering himself, he fashions himself in the likeness of his own father. From the name he picks from his father's library, to the assumption of the management of a slaveholding estate, the marriage of the owner's only daughter, and the assumption of his wife's heritage after her death, John indeed *makes* himself, allegorically, by slipping into the patriarchal tropes of southern Anglo-Saxon society. When he returns to Patesville at the beginning of the novel, therefore, he returns not only literally as a father looking for a surrogate mother for his son, but also figuratively, assuming a position once occupied by his father. Walking down the street behind his sister, he looks at her in much the same way as his father once looked at his mother, Molly, and Rena can escape John's objectifying gaze no less than Molly as a young woman could "escape critical observation" (105) by the man who was to become the father of her children. And when John visits the house behind the cedars in the evening, his mother and sister look up to him as to a "king" (13), much as Molly had considered her white lover "her king" (107). Later, when John takes Rena to his southern residence, where she lives like a "mistress, and taste[s] the sweets of power" (43), he places her in a similarly "false relation to society" (105) as his father placed his mistress Molly when he established her in the house behind the cedars. And yet, for all the success with which he establishes himself, John exhibits a persistent awareness of his own inauthentic relation to his adopted identity and is said to feel like "a naturalized foreigner" (45) among white southern society.

As the mark of the displacement inherent in his identification, John's melancholy acts as a nagging reminder of the object that his acquired status places out of his reach. As such, it manifests itself as both "an overmastering impulse" (19), threatening a breach of his outward identity, and the consciousness of the impossibility of its fulfillment. Although he seems powerless to resist it, his indulgence in it nevertheless at every step confronts him with its futility. The object of his melancholy appears to be the blackness that his assumption of whiteness has forced him to abandon, but this blackness stands above all for an authentic relation to society that he has had to forsake, "a living link" (44) that he hopes to restore by bringing his sister to his new home. As an object of melancholy, John's longed-for community inevitably presents itself to him in the form of nostalgia and taboo, highlighting the elusiveness of such a relation. His return to his hometown at the beginning of the novel, prompted by nostalgia, is therefore disappointing on several counts. Not only must he deny himself the satisfaction of being recognized by those who might still remember him, but he finds

that his affection lingers on memories (of slavery) that should not be pleasant and the places that house his memories on closer inspection turn out to be either empty or occupied by something else. Having "cherished a tender feeling for his mother" (19) during his absence, on his return to the house behind the cedars he appears coolly detached and incapable of showing genuine filial love. Similarly, the feelings that the reunion with his sister stimulate in her brother do not correspond to a resumption of an earlier relationship between siblings but amount to something that John vaguely acknowledges as "more than brotherly love" (44), which Donald Gibson has spelled out as a "psychologically incestuous relation" (xviii).

Insofar as melancholy expresses the way, in Chesnutt's words, John's blood cries out for its own, rage is the emotion one would expect to characterize him most vividly. Indeed, from this point of view, what appears most remarkable about him is how free from rancor he in fact turns out to be. The only time rage actually rises within him, when on his return he contemplates his mother's "homelike" kitchen, Chesnutt makes a point of showing how quickly John regains his balance:

The sight of it moved his heart, and he felt for the moment a sort of blind anger against the fate which made it necessary that he should visit the home of his childhood, if at all, like a thief in the night. But he realized, after a moment, that the thought was pure sentiment, and that one who had gained so much ought not to complain if he must give up a little. He who would climb the heights of life must leave even the pleasantest valleys behind. (20)

Nor could we say, I think, that his restraint here, or the philosophical gloom he displays at the beginning of the novel, betrays the intense self-directed aggressiveness we might expect, according to Freud, from the man who controls his aggressiveness (Gay 655). In both cases, John instead finds refuge in a triteness that shows him strangely reconciled to his melancholy. This strangeness is of course part of what strained the imagination of a reader like Gilder and reminds us of the "lack of spontaneous life" that distinguishes John as an allegorical figure. Yet, recognizing it as an alternative to blind rage, we will take an interest in the life that John, for all his apparent lifelessness, is living.

We should, I think, see the turn to triteness as above all a move, and triteness itself as something that affords John a certain – mental – mobility. In the passage quoted above, this appears to be emphasized, as the turn itself maneuvers a shift from one form of movement to another: from being moved to climbing. While it is possible to read this movement as a form of repression, whereby a vague upward aspiration is substituted for an ambivalent emotional investment,¹² the way Chesnutt focuses on the turn suggests another evaluation. What is given up here is in fact not denied but

12 The phrase "moved his heart" is ambivalent because it can refer both to pleasure, recalling the repeated "thrills of pleasure" (3, 7) that accompany John's revisiting of familiar scenes, and to the anger that stirs in his heart, or indeed to the way pleasure gives way to anger. Anger once again rises in John after the breaking of his sister's engagement to George Tryon. Identified as "a certain bitterness against white people [...] which he had put aside years ago, with his dark blood" (121), it seems inseparable from the agency of "race," while the gesture of putting it aside again suggests that John discovers an agency of his own by an internal substitution of manner for blood.

kept within view, and the turn away does not elude John's perception. It is a rather lucid withdrawal and resembles, I would suggest, a kind of awakening inasmuch as it leads from blindness to realization, from anger to a sense of renunciation, and from a moment of being moved to the temporal indeterminacy of a trite expression. This is not to say that this awakening is fully expressed by the well-worn maxim that closes the passage, but rather that it is figured by the turn to triteness itself. Triteness, in other words, is significant here not for what it expresses but precisely for its apparent failure as a genuine expression, its vacuousness or distance from an original utterance marking a space for movement. As a rhetorical figure it corresponds to the displacement that we have observed as being constitutive of John's identification.

Triteness then, paradoxically, serves as a genuine expression of John's sense of being insofar as it is based on the difference, or slippage, within identity, suggesting John's allegorical occupation of identity, in de Man's sense of allegory that "designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, [...] establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference" (207). In John's case this void is the gap within identity that the figure of "race" marks and insofar as he takes advantage of this space, John may be said to perform the movement by which this space is re-imagined as a site of becoming, which Hortense Spillers characterizes as a "movement across an interior space [that] demarcates the discipline of self-reflection, or the content of a self-interrogation that 'race' always covers as an already-answered" (408). Visiting his mother's house "like a thief in the night" (20) and living like "a naturalized foreigner in the world of wide opportunity" (45), John inhabits his identity as a trope, in a relationship of not fully belonging, and makes his home in a form of non-coincidence – being both and neither where "race" would posit an either/or – that is both claimed and accepted. As such, this non-coincidence establishes him for us as the representative of an emergent self formed by what Spillers calls "substitutive identities – [...] the capacity to represent a self through masks of self-negation" (407).

Such a reading, following Spillers's tracing of the convergence of "the dialectics of self-reflection and the strategies of a psychoanalytic hermeneutic [...] at the site of a 'new woman'/'man'" (407), acknowledges Chesnutt's rendering of John's psychic life as a corollary of an imagined subjectivity whose newness resides precisely in its elusiveness. This newness is the mark of the repetition that is constitutive of allegory, registering its temporal displacement, which in John's case we apprehend in the form of mobility. While his melancholy lingers over the distance by fixing "an unreachable anteriority" (de Man 222), his deliberate assumption of it accounts for his elusiveness. This elusiveness, which establishes John as a figure of Nietzschean possibility in Chesnutt's novel,¹³ manifests itself in various ways – not only in his actual withdraw-

13 Ross Posnock also reads John's elusiveness as a sign of Nietzschean potential and suggests that "illegibility becomes a source of potent possibility in Jim Crow's identitarian regime" (346).

al from the story two thirds through the narrative but also in his pervasive irony, which characterizes him as a satirist of the social life in which he takes part.¹⁴

His melancholy and elusiveness are the distinguishing marks of "the populous loneliness" (45) in which John finds himself, and this phrase reminds us that in the novel he appears above all in search of company. To imagine a community in John's place, given his shifting identity, is indeed the greatest challenge that *The House Behind the Cedars* presents its readers, and the challenge is made compelling, both implicitly and explicitly. Implicitly, by the attachment that is formed by way of focalization, which makes the reader a party to John's ironies, and by John's eventual disappearance, which may stimulate readers' interest in him and suggests the possibility of his being in the readers' midst without their knowledge.¹⁵ Explicitly, in that as the representative of (a) "new people" John encourages, and perhaps engineers, the match and courtship between his sister and his white friend, George Tryon. While John's story suggests the inventive potential inherent in an allegorically assumed identity, however, his sister's story dramatizes the risk involved in claiming an allegorical identity and the difficulty of consciously sustaining a sense of newness on the site of "race."

III

John's return to Patesville at the beginning of *The House Behind the Cedars* is only one of several returns that punctuate the plot of Chesnutt's novel and among which John's departure from the story forms a conspicuous contrast. The most notable of these returns bring the other protagonists, John's sister Rena and her white lover George, repeatedly back to the house behind the cedars, which is the home of John's and Rena's childhood. All of these returns follow either a compulsion or a sense of obligation. John's own return, although clearly not unpremeditated, is said to follow "an overmastering impulse" (19). His sister's first return, after she has accompanied John to his southern estate, is prompted by a dream and a letter expressing her mother's longing for her children; and at the end of the novel, she is brought back fatally ill to her mother's house by her loyal neighbor Frank. Meanwhile, George, after having found out Rena's racial identity, himself returns twice to the house behind the cedars, obeying a mixture of guilt and desire he can hardly rationalize.

14 John's satirical irony is evident from the opening pages of the novel, where it has a decidedly cynical quality. This irony blurs our impression and complicates our judgment of his character. Whether adopting a calculating tone with his mother in order to gain her approval to let her daughter go with him, or mingling affably "with the captain and the other cabin passengers" (29) on the boat that takes him and Rena "down the river," or expounding the virtues of the Southern "renaissance of chivalry" (32) to Mrs. Newberry, John indeed looks suspiciously like a confidence man, and it is this suspicion that may prompt our inference that he engineers the plot that will link his sister and his friend.

15 Charles Duncan has noted that by taking his leave from the story, John "disappears into (*not* out of) the culture at large" (15).

These compulsive returns, which all gravitate towards the house behind the cedars, establish the protagonists as representatives of a history of racial relations seen as a chain of involuntary repetition, in which the past ineluctably returns under the sign of sin. The novel accentuates this problem of involuntary repetition and its imaginative working through in the contrast between the thwarted union of Rena and George and the open career of John. For Rena and George, the sudden confrontation of the identities that govern their lives unconsciously proves traumatic, forcing them, in the words of the narrator, to “expiate the sins of the fathers” (21), as they struggle helplessly against the circumstances that compel them to reenact the ill-fated roles of a historically predetermined narrative. By contrast, John’s gradual awakening to the inauthenticity of identity allows him to take advantage of it. Instead of becoming an unwitting allegory of unhappy miscegenation, his life assumes the *form* of allegory, as he makes his home in the very form of the traumatic repetition that appears to structure the history of segregation.

In the contrasting stories of John and Rena, then, Chesnutt dramatizes the necessity, the inevitability even, of self-reflection in the form of emerging from a dreamlike state and highlights at the same time the possibility as well as the risk involved in such awakening. Figured as the departure from the house behind the cedars, awakening, the experience of the eyes opening, is ambiguous, capable both of loosening the characters’ unconscious attachment to their identities and of hastening their return into the dominant symbolic order.

In focusing on this fundamentally ambiguous moment in *The House Behind the Cedars* as a form of awakening, I would like to suggest the relevance of Lacan’s analysis of the emergence of the subject in consciousness to a reading of Chesnutt’s allegorical conception of identity under the sign of “race.” In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis* (53–64), Lacan discusses the experience of awakening in order to elucidate the conflictual relationship within the self of what Freud referred to as the reality principle and the pleasure principle, between the encounter with reality in perception and the self’s constitution by identification in the realm of representation. Lacan suggests the exemplariness of awakening in the process of identity formation by recalling the story that Freud tells in *The Interpretation of Dreams* of a father who in his dream was alerted by the voice of his dead son to the fact that the body of the dead boy had accidentally caught fire, and relating it to the rather more common experience of being awakened by a knocking, in which the knocking is perceived and becomes part of a dream before it is assimilated by consciousness as the cause of awakening. Awakening in this view manifests a gap or distance between perception and consciousness, in which the mind momentarily apprehends something (wrapped in a dream) that is inassimilable to consciousness, before the self reconstitutes itself in its waking state and closes the gap by recognizing a coincidence. What appears as a coincidence, however, according to Lacan, marks the site of a missed encounter with reality as it addresses us in a place inaccessible to cognition, an encounter, that is, with the real in its irreducible alterity, which is missed precisely as it

is assimilated by consciousness, made to coincide with the self's recovery of its identity in representation.

As Cathy Caruth has emphasized, awakening is thus for Lacan "the site of a trauma" (100, emphasis removed), the experience of a radical gap between seeing and knowing, when something by virtue of the very nature of its address to sight can neither be ignored nor known, which the mind sustains as a "breach in [its] experience of time, self, and the world" (4). Inevitably followed by the return of consciousness under the aegis of the sign, the experience of awakening thus manifests a split or a doubling within the self, which, although fundamental, is essentially ephemeral and can endure only "by repeating itself endlessly" (Lacan 58). Recognizing it as "the insistence of the trauma in making us aware of its existence" (55), Lacan associates this repetition with a particular imperative that emanates from the encounter with the real: "Repetition demands the new" (61). He identifies this newness as the dimension of the ludic in order to draw attention to "the most radical diversity constituted by repetition in itself" (61). As in de Man's concept of allegory therefore, newness here appears as the moment of non-coincidence that is constitutive of repetition, the elusive temporal element that distances the repetition from its origin. In this sense, repetition is that which resists return, the doubling back of the loop, by carrying forward the gap. The association of this gap with trauma, as with melancholy – recalling Freud's characterization of melancholy as an open wound (Gay 589) –, however, points to what Lacan calls "the ambiguity of the function of awakening" (60), for the awareness that awakening directs us to is one of inauthenticity and the newness it evokes implies renunciation. As such, the moment of awakening is "originally unwelcome" (69), something unavoidable from which the mind involuntarily retreats.

The story of Rena and George is a story of missed encounters, repetition and return, such as characterize the emergence of consciousness figured as an awakening. It begins with Rena's departure from the house behind the cedars and its ambiguity, the fact that it harbors a risk as well as a promise, is intimated by the sense of safety and intimacy that surrounds Rena in the garden of her mother's house in the opening chapter of the novel. Described in full bloom, the garden appears like an earthly paradise but is in fact Molly's reward for having "eaten of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge" (106), a gift of her white lover, its lushness concealing a dark underside:

On dark or wintry days, the aspect of this garden must have been extremely sombre and depressing, and it might well have seemed a fit place to hide some guilty or disgraceful secret. But on the bright morning when Warwick stood looking through the cedars, it seemed [...] an ideal retreat from the fierce sunshine and the sultry heat of the approaching summer. (7)

In John's eyes the garden thus also seems to be an image of the symbolic order and Rena's intimacy with the flowers suggests the unreflected state of her selfhood, as he will later recall it: "Her childish happiness had been that of ignorance; she could never be happy there again. She had flowered in the sunlight; she must not pine away in the shade" (120).

Rena's awakening begins when she follows her brother to Clarence where she falls in love with his friend George Tryon, a white southerner. The encounter and the ensuing courtship also mark the beginning of an awakening for George whose previous life, like Rena's, "had been confined unconsciously, and as a matter of course, within the boundaries of his own race" (96). Falling in love, Rena and George enter a dreamlike period, in which, as they each behold the other as object of love, they glimpse a realm that lies beyond their knowledge. Chesnutt emphasizes the dreamlike quality of the encounter, which allows Rena and George to apprehend it in a veiled state, by locating it in a place where both of them are strangers, away from home, and in the theatrical context of a medieval tournament and ball, where George in the guise of a knight elects Rena as the Queen of Love and Beauty. Yet the emergence of possibility "occur[s] between dream and awakening" (Lacan 59), not in the fantasy of the dream itself, but in the dream insofar as it sustains a vivid apprehension of reality that is not available to waking consciousness. The love that springs up between Rena and George is not an illusion based on a mistaken belief that they are in fact queen and knight, although they cannot see, as John does, that the sense of newness and possibility they experience is a function precisely of the non-coincidence of role and being, of the suspension of identity that the role in its very conventionality and emptiness makes possible.¹⁶

But awakening, in Lacan's terms, "works in two directions" and while it points to a reality "beyond the dream – in what the dream envelops," it also "re-situates us in a constituted and represented reality" (60). It is because it inevitably leads back to a reality that is incommensurate with the reality that comes to them as in a dream that both Rena and George intuitively dread and defer the moment of waking up. Thus they both recognize a coincidence at the very moments when the gap between seeing (or hearing) and knowing is revealed to them. When Rena, anticipating the confrontation, points to her nephew's black nurse and anxiously asks George whether he would love her, "if [she] were Albert's nurse" (59), she fails to see that the words of his answer miss the very point she was trying to test. Similarly, when George, having fallen asleep while waiting for an acquaintance in Patesville (where he will eventually discover Rena's secret), dreams of Rena and is awakened by the sound of her voice, his awakening mind, emerging from sleep but preferring to dream, registers "an incongruity" between the sound and the words. "The shock was sufficient to disturb Tryon's slumber, and he struggled slowly back to consciousness. When fully awake, he thought he heard a light footfall descending the stairs" (72). When told that the voice belonged to a colored woman, he cannot acknowledge the fact other than as an annoying coincidence.

16 Although cloaked in highly conventional images, the love between Rena and George is an effect of their imaginative or playful distancing of their accustomed selves, a sense of otherness that makes them both potentially "new people" (57). As an obvious artifice, the tournament seems ideally suited to accustom Rena and George to the possibility of reinventing themselves by occupying conventional roles, as John shrewdly points out when he tells Rena that "[i]f George were but masked and you were veiled, we should have a romantic situation" (35).

When the confrontation finally comes, it comes as a shock that will prove traumatic for both Rena and George. By all appearances a coincidence, it is marked by the abrupt closure of a gap between seeing and knowing, between what they see and what their seeing signifies. Chesnutt emphasizes the traumatic character of the event by describing it as an experience in which sight overwhelms the mind. As Rena steps out of the drugstore in Patesville, her eyes meet George's surprised stare:

When Rena's eyes fell upon the young man in the buggy, she saw a face as pale as death, with staring eyes, in which love, which once had reigned there, had now given place to astonishment and horror. She stood a moment as if turned to stone. One appealing glance she gave, — a look that might have softened adamant. When she saw that it brought no answering sign of love or sorrow or regret, the color faded from her cheek, the light from her eye, and she fell fainting to the ground. (94)

Although it appears like a revelation, it is clear that what is revealed is precisely what neither Rena nor George can see. The shock of vision, manifest in the failure of looks to communicate, severs the bond between them at the very moment when the element of immediacy leaps from sight to cognition, attaching itself to an idea, the sudden evidence of an identity that is incompatible with their experiential self. The moment, significantly poised on the threshold of a drugstore, describes "how," in Hortense Spillers's words, "'race,' as a poisonous idea, insinuates itself not only across and between ethnicities but within" (385). Filling in the interior space of possibility that had been the site of the relationship between Rena and George, it erases it by refiguring it as an insurmountable chasm. The precipice that opens between them thus also separates each from the emergent self that their relationship had given rise to.

The precipitous recognition leaves not only Rena unconscious but also "knock[s] the bottom out of things for [George]" (95). As they recover, they both reconstitute their identities in accordance with the dominant symbolic order of their time. Chesnutt describes this absorption of his characters by the figure of "race" as their return under the sign of sin, which from this point on governs their identities and locks them in allegorical roles. Even as they identify, allegorically, in each other the evidence of sin, of a being that is not pristine but the result of unacknowledged adulteration — as George sees in Rena the corruption of blood and Rena sees in George the corruption of love — they both slide into allegorical roles that signal the return of the past in the present. Reluctantly welcomed as the return to a true state of being within the social order of things, their absorption in allegory thus threatens to extinguish the spark of possibility in Rena's and George's lives, prompting them to lead a half-life of expiation and despair. Inasmuch as it entails the denial of a life of possibility, this assumption of allegory recalls John's dictum that "Death [...] is the penalty that all must pay for the crime of living" (4). Unlike John, whose gradual awakening allows him to locate his being in the displacement that situates allegory in relation to truth, Rena's and George's sudden confrontation of this interior space makes them take allegory for truth itself and compels them to reject the sense of otherness as a sign of falsehood. The moment of revelation to which they both refer as eye-opening (119, 150) thus returns them to the familiar assumptions of "race," accentuated in their return to their parental homes.

As the dead hand of the past to which the opening of *The House Behind the Cedars* alludes, allegory claims the emergent selfhood of Rena and George, compelling them to enact predetermined roles as types. In the form of a foreclosed imagination, this manifests both a threat and a temptation, as Judge Straight, John's mentor in the novel, foresees when he contemplates the consequences of the disclosure of Rena's racial background for the two lovers: "The young man was a gentleman – so had been the girl's father. [...] Would the young man's love turn to disgust and repulsion, or would it merely sink from the level of worship to that of desire? Would the girl, denied marriage, accept anything else? Her mother had" (80). While George seems unable to resist the reversion to the type of a southern gentleman who indulges a secret desire for a colored woman, Rena assumes her allegorical role with greater awareness by choosing to become a teacher of black children. Yet her imagination, dominated by the awareness of sin, irresistibly pushes her into the shape of another type. As the narrator notes, "the Fates willed that her future should be but another link in a connected chain [...] Rena's life since her great awakening had been that of the emotions, and her temperament made of it a continuous life" (131). Thus she chooses to fashion herself in continuity with a history of submission, transgression and atonement, and decides "to sacrifice her life upon [the] altar" of black education (164), in a move that the narrator skeptically judges well-intentioned but ill-advised.¹⁷

Rena's choice propels her into the sentimental role of the tragic mulatta, the nineteenth century's most conspicuous trope of miscegenation as sin, and as such she becomes a commodity not only for George, who continues to chase her, but also for the reader, whose sympathy for her helpless efforts to preserve her virtue depends on a tacit acknowledgment of the desire that threatens to violate her. Indeed, the way the narrative in the second half of the novel mobilizes its readers' interest, oscillating between Rena's flight and George's pursuit, seems calculated to confront Chesnut's audience with its own investment in allegory, asking them to acknowledge its purchase on their imagination even as they recognize its artificiality. This movement reaches its climax toward the end, when Rena, trying to escape, is crushed by the elements, as Chesnut brings into full view the figurative machinery that controls his narrative:

The storm increased in violence. The air grew darker and darker. It was near evening, the clouds were dense, the thick woods increased the gloom. Suddenly a blinding flash of lightning pierced the darkness, followed by a sharp clap of thunder. There was a crash of falling timber. Terror-stricken, Rena flew forward through the forest, the underbrush growing closer and closer as she advanced.

17 Sending Rena off to teach in a remote country school, Chesnut no doubt remembered his own frustrating experience as a teacher in the summer 1875. The narrator's skeptical comment on Rena's ambition, that it "seemed like expecting a man to lift himself by his boot-straps" (164), recalls Chesnut's assessment of his efforts in his diary: "all the reason and demonstration has no more effect than a drop of water on a field of dry wheat" (Brodhead, *The Journals* 82). Based on his own experience, Rena's declining health as a result of her efforts must have seemed predictable to Chesnut who found "that schoolteaching directly or indirectly, has ruined my health" (79). Still, the narrator acknowledges that "for every child [Rena] taught to read and write she opened, if ever so little, the door of opportunity" (164).

Suddenly the earth gave way beneath her feet and she sank into a concealed morass. By clasping the trunk of a neighboring sapling she extricated herself with an effort, and realized with a horrible certainty that she was lost in the swamp. (182)

The passage recalls, by contrast, the similarly extended description of Rena in her mother's garden at the beginning of the novel and bears out its intimation: the last thing she sees before "[falling] heavily to the earth", is "a huge black snake" (182). By foregrounding the conventions of sentimental melodrama, which allow the setting to intervene powerfully in the action, however, Chesnutt self-consciously identifies Rena as above all a victim of her ideological environment. Seen in this light, the self-conscious over-writing of Rena's end may contrast with the way John is abruptly written out of the novel, but the effect is similar. In both cases, Chesnutt appears to abandon his protagonists to the imagination of his readers, pointing to the possibility of untold alternative lives beyond the confines of the narrative.¹⁸

While the narrative follows the logic of allegory to its seemingly inevitable close, Chesnutt does not allow us to forget that at the heart of it is a traumatic experience. Throughout the second half of the novel, the shock of recognition indeed structures the lives of Rena and George as survivors of an event which, as event, their minds have assimilated precipitously and incompletely, leaving a residue of experience that should be dead but continues to haunt their consciousness and their dreams. This manifests itself in their melancholic mood, oscillating rapidly between self-pity and self-reproach, between periods of despondency and bursts of enthusiasm, such as George's repeated but unkept vows to defy the customs that prohibit his union with Rena. Above all, the trauma manifests itself in rationalized actions that inevitably take the form of returns, bringing the former lovers into each other's proximity and compelling them to relive the shipwreck of their love.

In one of these repetitions, George returns to the house behind the cedars, "[m]oved by tenderness and thoughts of self-sacrifice" (148), only to see Rena dancing in the arms of a colored man, apparently oblivious to the love she has lost. Meanwhile, Rena relives in "a trying ordeal" (149) the memory of her first dance with George (41), as a stark contrast to her present situation. Though ostensibly accentuating the contrast, however, Chesnutt actually uses the term "trying ordeal" in both scenes, drawing attention to what is repeated as a discomforting experience of non-

18 The self-consciousness of Chesnutt's abandoning of Rena is underlined by the fact that Rena ends up "unconscious in the edge of the swamp, only a few rods from a well-defined path which would soon have led her to the open highway" (183). Ross Posnock has pointed out the parallel between Rena's fate and Chesnutt's earliest story, "Lost in a swamp," which he recorded in his journal in 1875 (Brodhead, *The Journals* 46–47). According to Posnock, in this tale "the act of writing is figured as immersion in a swamp," announcing a concept of his intellectual endeavor that Chesnutt would "later describe [...] as a continual 'working in the dark'" (348). Unlike Rena, the narrator of "Lost in a Swamp" emerges from the allegorical swamp, heralding Chesnutt's "birth" as a writer. As the site of writing, the swamp thus figures as a hazardous as well as potentially transforming zone to which Chesnutt's imagination continues to return.

coincidence.¹⁹ Later, Rena's decision to become a country school teacher brings her to George's neighborhood, where the possibility to renew their former relationship again looms large and ultimately seals their fate. Spawned by the trauma, these recurrent missed encounters form "link[s] in a connected chain" (131), which eventually leads to Rena's death and George's despair. Fate apparently overrules probability, but what appears as coincidence, or (missed) chance, at the heart of fate, can be seen as the insistence, within the structure of allegory, of an element that eludes signification. Thus repetition momentarily acts as a reminder of a life not lived, a promise not fulfilled, which the two characters cannot but apprehend as sin and reject, but which continues to address them as if from another time.

IV

The stories of John and Rena present contrasting outcomes of the recognition of the inauthenticity of identity. While John's experience, beginning in resentment, takes the form of a habituation that leads him to a consciousness marked by a lucid melancholy, which allows him to inhabit the tropes of "race" as vacant sites, Rena's experience of the incommensurability of her desire with the claims of identity hastens her submission to these claims. Whereas John's gradual awakening works to loosen his bonds to the symbolic order, Rena's sudden confrontation of the gap within identity results in a more complete identification through the repression of her desire, expressed in her resigned submission to her fate: "God must have meant me to stay here, or He would not have sent me back. I shall accept things as they are" (121). Although Rena's awakened consciousness resembles John's in the spirit of renunciation, her deliberate acceptance of "things as they are" contrasts with his active assumption that things are not what they seem. These contrasting choices are readily aligned with conventional gender roles, according to which, as Rena points out, "[a] man may make a new place for himself – a woman is born and bound to hers" (121).²⁰ Yet her musing on the unclearly seen purpose of her brother's and her own life draws attention to their complementarity in Chesnutt's novel.

The symmetry and contrast between John and Rena remind us of their allegorical dimension in Chesnutt's fictional scheme. Representing the two sides of allegory, as

19 The phrase "trying ordeal" indeed resonates with Chesnutt's use of the verb "try" elsewhere in the novel, implying an experimental reliance on chance, the difference within repetition. These include Rena's fear that the "Prince would never try on the glass slipper" (48), John's appeal to Rena to "try again" (119) when George has left her, and indeed George's surname "Tryon" itself, suggesting that he – like the reader – may be the unwitting subject of an experiment.

20 Bringing his protagonists in line with gender conventions of his time may have been a concession Chesnutt made in order to get his novel published, as Robert Sedlack's discussion of the revisions of the manuscript suggests. In this, the final shape of Rena contrasts with that of Mandy in *Mandy Oxendine*, who follows a course similar to John's and whose future at the end of the novel remains equally open. Chesnutt worked on *Mandy Oxendine* in the 1890s in between revisions of the "Rena Walden" manuscript but failed to have it accepted for publication in his lifetime.

an empty trope of possibility and as the sign of an irresistible interpellation, they appear to be designed to confront readers with the limitations that identification imposes on the quest for self-realization. This is precisely their function as vehicles of a story of awakenings, which takes its readers from identification to an awareness of the separation and difference that the act of identification implies and that only makes it possible. To the extent that it enables such awareness, then, Chesnutt's novel may be said to offer its readers, too, the possibility of an awakening, an apprehension of the difference at the heart of selfhood, which points to an imaginable future beyond segregation. Responding to this call, readers of *The House Behind the Cedars* seem encouraged to take up Chesnutt's challenge to imagine a community on the basis of the interior space of "substitutive identities" (Spillers 407), which the figure of "race" designates as a no-man's land.²¹

In keeping with allegory as a figure of non-coincidence, the text encourages such an acknowledgment not within the purview of the narrative proper but, as it were, in its afterlife, in reflections on John's unrepresented future or on Rena's and George's un-lived lives, as well as in the teasing out of connotations embedded in the novel's allusive style. As such, it is assisted by secondary characters who, at a remove from the action, act as witnesses to the two stories the novel tells. One of these figures is Judge Straight, who shares John's secret and his appreciation of ruins and whose lack of prejudice leads him to seek, however clumsily, to protect Rena as well as John. The other is Frank, Rena's neighbor who is attached to her in a love that the novel says is "not of the selfish kind" (88). In his humble helpfulness to his lighter colored neighbors, he at first sight looks like the stereotype of "dog-like fidelity and devotion" that Chesnutt said he didn't "care to write about" (McElrath & Leitz 65). Yet if Frank appears to be a concession to Chesnutt's more bigoted readers, his simplicity may well be deceptive. His renunciation resembles John's, suggesting that he may inhabit the tropes of black humility in a similar fashion as John inhabits those of white gentility. Without a sense of guilt or resentment, his generosity, rather than a weakness, evinces a more than nominal emancipation. Frank's shadowlike presence throughout the novel is in fact as elusive as John's and his selflessness remains enigmatic, not merely the sign of a lack but also potentially the figure of a future beyond the claims of identity that govern the novel's action.²² Chesnutt suggests as much in a passage in

21 From this point of view, Rena indeed appears to be speaking in a metanarrative aside when, having noted that some people are made white and others black, she suggests to John, "Perhaps He meant us to bring the others together in his own good time" (121). The suggestion recalls Chesnutt's famous announcement of his mission in an 1880 journal entry: "it is the province of literature [...] to accustom the public mind to the idea [of racial equality]; and by while amusing them to familiarize lead them on imperceptibly, unconsciously step by step to the desired state of feeling" (Brodhead, *The Journals* 140). As if foreshadowing the name of Tryon, the substitution of "lead on" (with its suggestion of blindfoldedness) for "familiarize" indeed shows that Chesnutt realized that he would have to expose his readers to an encounter that would originally be unwelcome.

22 My reading here matches that of M. Giulia Fabi, who comments similarly on "Frank's unseen presence" and identifies him as "the only knightly character in the novel because he is governed by impulses that are not blindly selfish" (87).

which Frank himself becomes the subject of a reflection on slavery and emancipation in interdependence:

His was one of those rare souls that can give with small hope of return. [...] There are depths of fidelity and devotion in the negro heart that have never been fathomed or fully appreciated. Now and then in the kindlier phases of slavery these qualities were brightly conspicuous, and in them, if wisely appealed to, lies the strongest hope of amity between the two races whose destiny seems bound up together in the Western world. (117–18)

If Frank is the kind of black character that most appealed to readers like Richard Gilder, he is also most obviously an allegorical figure, defined by his function in the narrative, which is to guide the reader's perspective and to hint at a depth of being that defies identification. As such he transmits the address that is embedded in the novel's stories of awakening to Chesnutt's readers. Chesnutt may have had reason to doubt whether this transmission would be received, but the possibility of its reception, stored within the allegorical fabric of the text, is the reason why his novel continues to matter to us.

References

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